



STATE OF MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
LANSING



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**MEMORANDUM**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Robert Stephenson, 2009-2010 Michigan Teacher of the Year

SUBJECT: Teacher of the Year Report

**In Okemos**

In the spring of 2009, the Okemos School Board opted to delay the closure of two elementary buildings and the reconfiguration of its schools for one year. That bold decision had both negative and positive outcomes. Because we yielded no financial savings for the 2009-2010 year, our shortfall that would carry forward grew, which has resulted in dramatic staffing changes at every level for the coming year. Coupled with the consideration to eliminate reading consultants, counselors, transportation, athletics, gifted and talented, instructional technology personnel, IMC coordinators, and privatizing custodial services, Okemos will yet again be forced to make unpopular decisions in hopes of remaining solvent. As easy as it is to fault our Board for delaying such drastic changes last summer, I applaud their courage. Throughout this year, our students have had to face the inevitable loss of "their school" yet because we had the time to develop an effective sensitive transition plan, our students are looking forward with optimism. Coordinating Visitation Days so that each grade level had a day to come together to meet the new principal, new teachers, make new friends, tour the building, and play on the playground was a culminating district-wide effort to preserve the feelings of every child through this difficult process. When it comes to educating our children, decision makers must recognize that the socio-emotional security of our students takes precedent above all else. My district honors its students, and for that, I am incredibly proud.

**At Wardcliff**

After 55 years of operation in the Okemos Public Schools, Wardcliff Elementary will lock its doors. The staff has all been reassigned to existing buildings and I will be teaching third grade at Hiawatha Elementary School for the 2010-2011 school year. As I had expected, the amazing Wardcliff staff has remained positive throughout this year choosing to celebrate each day that we have been together and helping

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our students discover the great things that await them in their new schools. As we do at the conclusion of every year, we have a number of events planned. We have our Field Day games followed by a barbecue lunch; we will have a family evening picnic, complete with games and a DJ; and this year there will be a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade graduation. We also made the decision to take a school-wide photo that each child will receive, as well as their own copy of a Wardcliff Memories Book that we have been compiling for the last two months. Our final day will have a special assembly where the staff will perform and we will award each student with a 2010 Allstars Medal. At dismissal the students will exit through our "staff tunnel" and we will give them the "big wave" as the buses leave. Wardcliff has been a significant part of my life for 16 years and I have treasured every day of it.

### **Within Room 110's Door to Discovery**

At the end of every year I have my students involved in cross curricular investigations on ecology and the relationship of living things. As one of my many extensions in the unit, I coordinate a Pond Study with a friend of mine who is a Professor of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University. I take the students to the pond located behind Kinawa School in Okemos, where we spend the morning completing a number of science inquiry tasks. We conduct habitat comparisons from three different ecosystems and also engage in camouflage challenges. The students get particularly excited about the specimens that we catch from the pond using seine nets, dip nets, and zooplankton nets. After our analysis in the "field" we take many of them back to school for further investigation. During the following week, I have the students study zooplankton with microscopes and they learn to identify various types, like Daphnia, Cyclops, and Rotifers, as well as learn their place within the context of the pond ecosystem. During this comprehensive investigative unit, the students read and write about the relationship of living things, recognize the need to protect animal habitats, and discover the roles they each can play to influence the preservation of biodiversity. They become quite informed motivated activists.

At the end of every school year, I have a special Open House in Room 110 at Wardcliff for the graduating Okemos High School Seniors who were in my class 9 years before. The seniors get very excited about our Reunion Party, and occasionally even bring their parents and friends who did not attend Wardcliff. They often will bring me a senior picture, but I have a number of mementos for them as well. I save every card, drawing, picture that third graders make for me and I have them on display for the party. I also have video-taped recordings of the students when they were in my class, which I broadcast on my SMART Board. There is nothing more amusing than watching a room full of 18 year olds holding their cell phones to record images and video of themselves as third graders. Because I have always had my general classroom, and taught all of the third graders science, I invite all of the Wardcliff seniors back. It is a delightful evening to reminisce and touch base once more in person before they go their different directions to college. My hope is that whoever occupies Wardcliff next year might consider my hosting a little reunion party for some pretty special students.

I have recently written a grant proposal to Dart Container Corporation to support the addition to my existing Robotics equipment. This next phase will challenge students from ages 9 through 18 in terms of complexity and computer programming. I intend to offer Engineering and Robotics opportunities at my new elementary school, as well as look at offering classes through Okemos Community Education.

### **As MTOY**

One of the greatest joys I have experienced while serving as Michigan's Teacher of the Year has been the opportunity to share my passion for teaching and learning. I have continued to present to a number of groups since my last report. I was asked to give a Keynote Presentation for the Parade Company's Educator Day event entitled, "Creativity in the Classroom and Beyond." I presented at the Governor's Education Summit on "Preserving Innovation in the Midst of Education Reform" in East Lansing. I spoke at the Early Childhood Community Forum hosted by ECIC in Okemos. I spoke to and received a Recognition Award from the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, presenting "Keep Believing" in Acme. I attended the Early Childhood STAR Power Rally at the Capitol and spoke with Representatives about "The Importance of Supporting Early Childhood Programs." I presented "Investigating Static and Current Electricity, the Shocking Truth," to Okemos teachers. Finally, I addressed the MEA "Enough is Enough!" rally participants at the LCC Amphitheater in Lansing.

A number of different organizations asked to videotape me teaching students and sharing my philosophy of education on camera. I conducted a videotaped interview profiling classroom instructional strategies for MEEMIC's website and YouTube post. The HOME TV network made a similar request with a videotaped interview and recording of me teaching. While in Washington, DC, I filmed an ING Corporation Promotional Video and posed for their stock photos. I was interviewed by the "Capital Area Women's Lifestyle Magazine" for the Father's Day edition, and I had an interview with Matt Roush, the Editor for the "Great Lakes Innovation and Technology Report" to get my input on how educators can inspire entrepreneurial initiative.

The week in Washington, DC for the National Teacher of the Year announcement was incredibly memorable and I tried to make the most of every opportunity for advocacy. I met with Smithsonian Institution Specialists from the National Air and Space Museum, Tim Grove and Beth Wilson to give feedback on educational computer interactive programs in the museum. I attended the reception for all State Teachers of the Year at Vice President and Dr. Biden's home. I individually met with the West Wing advisor on Domestic Policy/Education and Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana (Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education), and her Chief of Staff. I participated in SMART Technologies Training Sessions and attended a dinner hosted by SMART Technologies in Arlington. I was invited to a working lunch and briefing with NEA leadership: Donna Harris-Aikens, Christiana O. Campos, Kim Anderson, and Lily Eskelsen (NEA Vice President). I attended the NSTOY Gala Announcement dinner at the Sphinx Club and met Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. I met with US Education Department

Leadership to get briefed and offered feedback on the Reauthorization of ESEA. I attended an evening tour of the monuments sponsored by Target. The highlight, of course, was meeting with President Obama in the Oval Office and attending the White House Ceremony in the Rose Garden.

Within the local community, I have had a number of additional opportunities. I had dinner with Paul Vallas, the Superintendent of Recovery School District in New Orleans, and several Education Alliance members. I met with Okemos Administrative Leadership and the Okemos Education Association Board regarding the MOU for the Second Race To The Top Application. I was observed teaching by novice and veteran teachers from two different districts to model Innovative Instructional Strategies and maximizing learning time. I participated in the WKAR Teacherline Advisory Council. I submitted my nominee's application for the Teaching It Forward Scholarship for the University of Phoenix. Ajaune Thomas is a senior from Everett High School in Lansing and I had the privilege to present her with the scholarship at her Senior Awards Ceremony. I was honored to receive an MEA Region 8 "Shout About It Award." Finally, I was pleased to be able to meet with Governor Granholm at the Governor's Office to share a few insights from my MTOY experience and my dreams for education in Michigan.

It has truly been an honor and a privilege to serve as the Michigan Teacher of the Year. I look forward to many more years of learning, teaching, and leading.